

Outside Context Problem 2: The Final War

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Summary: Sequel to Outside Context Problem. In the aftermath of the Battle for Nasces, the great clans of the South prepare for all out war. But with the Outside Context Problem driving the world ever closer to destruction, war is one thing nobody can afford- and one thing no Spartan will be able to avoid.

1. Primer, Prologue

Hi all, thanks for taking the time to check out this fic! The following isn't a chapter, just a bunch of primers for everyone who's interested. This is a sequel to a previous fic of mine, Outside Context Problem, but you don't have to read it to be able to understand this. So if you want, just skip straight to the next section to start!

World Primer:

Outside Context Problem is not directly set in the Halo Universe; rather it is set in a world that resembles a huge multiplayer game of Halo. Spartans are organized into clans of up to 10,000 members. These clans act like city states, and the main activity of each clan is war with others. There is also a lot of diplomacy, with various clans forming alliances, treaties and in some cases huge alliance blocks that shape entire continents.

Death is not the end for a Spartan; a few hours after being killed a Spartan respawns back at their clan base, near a device known as a core. Spartans do die, but only of old age after about 400 years of life. New Spartans are 'born' to a clan, spontaneously appearing from the clan's core.

During the events of Outside Context Problem, a threat to the established order emerged in the northern continent. The eponymous problem, so named because it was unlike anything Spartans had seen before, spread itself through silent black clad Spartans who moved at lightning speed and wielded energy swords exclusively. They possessed

the singular power to permanently kill Spartans, and quickly spread throughout the North, taking over clans at an astonishing rate. When they reached a clan's core it was converted into a device that produced new Blackheads- the minions- at an incredible rate, allowing the OCP to build up a huge army.

Story Primer:

In the wild lands north of the city of Nasces, a squad of Spartans from the clan Aspertias came upon a surprising situation while visiting an allied clan. The clan's Spartans had vanished, replaced by black-clad Spartans wielding energy swords. The squad escaped and informed their superiors, but nothing came of it until several more clans dropped off the net. Concerned, Aspertias began attempts to limit the spread of the Outside Context Problem- but it was too late.

Weakened by internal strife, Aspertias and the other clans of the north fell one by one. As the OCP moved to attack Nasces the crisis finally gained worldwide attention, and a large alliance met the threat head on in the Battle of Maire Valley. There the alliance suffered a crushing defeat, and retreated to defend Nasces.

The alliance was made predominantly of southern clans, lead by the influential Builders. The Builders sought to increase their power in Nasces and the north, and demanded concessions in return for their continued support. When Nasces refused, the Builders launched an attack of their own on the city. In the first part of the battle for Nasces, the southern and northern clans fought for control of the city until the arrival of the Ghost Alliance- a union of clans from the south-east of the Northern Continent- dislodged the Builders.

Their help came too late for Nasces, however, as the OCP poured it's minions into the city. The northern clans of the Panthers, the Striker Federation and the Ghost Alliance made a last ditch attempt to defend the SolNas bridge, which was the only land route from the Northern continent to the rest of the world, but the overwhelming numbers of the OCP's army made success impossible. All they could do was delay the inevitable.

While the final stages of the Battle for Nasces were playing out, a small group of Spartans executed an extraordinary plan to save the city and the world. They hijacked experimental spaceplanes from the Builders research base and used them to take control of the Anchor space station, hoping to drop kinetic weapons onto the OCP's army. Circumstances did not go their way, and as a last measure the group chose to drop the Anchor itself onto Nasces. Moments before the defending clans were overrun, the colossal space station impacted the city, flattening it, the bridge, and the OCP's army in one blow.

The world watches, stunned. But not for long. Before the dust has settled, powers are preparing for war. On one side are the Builders, determined to conquer what remains of the world; on the other, the Citadel clans of the East and the surviving independent clans and cities. Neither side will settle for anything less than the complete annihilation of the other. When the war comes it will be brutal- it will be the final war.

Character Primer: **(POV)**

From the North:

****June****: The former president of Aspertias, now working as head of intelligence for the Black Runners.

****Midori****: A Spartan of Aspertias, trapped in Cressat after the Battle for Nasces.

****Elesa****: A Spartan of Aspertias, in a relationship with Giorgio. Whereabouts unknown.

****Giorgio****: A Spartan of Aspertias, in a relationship with Elesa. Whereabouts unknown.

Lucas: A Spartan of the Scorpions. Whereabouts unknown.

Zero: A Spartan of Aspertias, and former lover of Vivian. Killed by Haru in the Battle for Nasces.

****Vivian****: A Spartan of Aspertias. Currently a Commander in the Ghost Alliance.

****Tomalon****: A Spartan of Vermillion. Currently a General in the Ghost Alliance.

Haru: A Spartan of Aspertias. Killed during the Battle for Nasces.

From the Centre:

Andreus: Architect-General of the Builders. Currently in Cressat following the Battle for Nasces.

Thompson: Former Architect-General of the Builders. Died before the Battle for Nasces.

Alcor: A Spartan of the Builders. Whereabouts unknown.

2. Prelude to War (1)

****Outside Context Problem 2: Prelude to War (1)****

1

It was a fairly pitiful army that returned to Cressat under Mason's command. Barely a thousand of the tens of thousands that were deployed returned, crammed onto a small number of Pelicans and fighter aircraft. No crowd awaited their return to the Builder Citadel, and nobody reported on it. The Builders didn't like to publicise their losses, and their subordinate clans followed suit.

Andreus was waiting on the landing pad when Mason's pelican touched down. His trademark sneer appeared as Mason exited the aircraft, and he swaggered over. Mason sighed, and prepared himself for a tongue lashing.

'I'm surprised you had the courage to return after your performance

up north,' Andreus began mockingly, 'given how little courage you showed in the face of a group of barbarian northmen.'

Mason clenched his fists. He towered over Andreus in his regular Builder armour, standing over two meters tall. His skin was fair, matching his cropped blonde hair and startling blue eyes. The MJOLNIR armour didn't exaggerate his body shape, which was more than could be said for his superior before him. Most imposing though was the hammer that hung down his back.

'With respect sir,' Mason replied as calmly as he could, 'We were outnumbered and out-gunned substantially. Had we stayed all we could have achieved was-'

'Thompson used to frequently tell me of your prowess in battle,' Andreus interrupted. 'How you're the reason we survived the second Coalition war, and how it was your skill that saved our armies in the Sulporan rainforest.' His tone became mocking again. 'Perhaps you're growing old? Losing your touch with modern warfare?'

'Had I received the reinforcements I asked for I could have held off the Ghosts,' Mason said. 'With what I had we stood no chance of surviving their attack.'

'So you're blaming the tools you were given?' Andreus asked. 'Isn't that the sign of a poor workman?'

'I'm just a Spartan, sir,' Mason said, trying to keep the anger out of his voice. 'I cannot do the impossible.'

'So it's my fault now? Did I set you too hard a task?'

__So without Thompson around Andreus shows his true colours. __'Is there a point to this, or are you just enjoying berating me?' Mason asked. 'Sir.'

Andreus smiled. __Figures. All he wanted was to get a rise out of me.__ 'I've called a meeting of the high command for a few hours time. Since you're here, you may as well come along.'

'Of course, sir.' Mason sighed. __Why do I have to listen to this little shit?__ 'I'll be there promptly.'

Andreus nodded and turned away before pausing and looking back. 'Oh, and you've been demoted. Alessia now has your position as Marshal.' He walked off.

Mason walked back to his Pelican slowly, and leaned his head against it's side. For good measure he also punched the aircraft, leaving a dent in the armour.

'You alright?' Mason looked up, seeing another Spartan walking towards him. A smile came to his face.

'I guess you saw all that?' he asked.

'Sure did,' Shara replied with a smile. 'That was brutal.'

'It was also uncalled for.' Mason shook his head. 'Thompson would never have gotten so out of shape.'

'I guess we're all going to have to come to terms with the fact that Andreus isn't Thompson,' Shara replied. 'You should have seen him when he heard you'd retreated. He was foaming at the mouth, and gave Alessia your position on the spot.' Mason's expression darkened. 'Sorry! Sore subject.'

'I guess I shouldn't be surprised,' Mason said glumly. 'She's always been in his pocket.'

'And he's certain of her loyalty,' Shara added. Mason frowned at her. 'I mean, she's practically in love with him.'

'We shouldn't be talking about this,' Mason said firmly. 'Let's just get to the damned meeting.' _Andreus... I suppose I just have to learn to live with him._

2

It was a dull sun that rose over Solidade following the battle in Nasces. Only a depressing, weak light managed to penetrate the dust clouds that covered the sky, which was quickly hidden behind growing storm clouds. By mid-morning a heavy rain was falling, carrying with it a dark sludge- the remains of the city of Nasces.

A lone Spartan braved the weather in the Black Runner base, a hundred kilometres south of Solidade. Her white armour was soon muddied in the incessant rain as she ran between the command buildings. Eventually she made it into the lobby of the central command station and stood dripping in the foyer, panting slightly.

'It's a nasty day out there,' one of the receptionists observed.

'Tell me about it,' June replied, taking her helmet off. Her shoulder length black hair followed the helmet out, expanding messily. 'Oh, damn!' June pawed at her hair, trying in vain to straighten it.

'Wren is expecting you now,' the receptionist read off his computer. 'I warn you, she's not in the best mood.'

'Thanks for the warning,' June replied appreciatively. 'Sorry about the mess on your floor.' She set off for Wren's command centre.

June's armour stood out amongst the Black Runners around her. Unlike the rest it was white and gold, the colours of the clan of Aspertias, long since destroyed by the Outside Context Problem. Beneath the white armour June's skin was dark, as was her hair. Her eyes were a deep brown, complementing the rest. More than one head turned her way as she walked through the command centre, which she ignored. Those who mattered knew her by sight.

Wren's office on the top floor was dark except for what little light made it through the blinds and the glow of a computer screen. Wren was working at her computer as June came in, but closed it down when she noticed. 'Ah, June,' she said, 'It's been a while, hasn't it?'

'So it has,' June replied, searching around for another chair. There didn't seem to be one, so she just remained standing. _Get to the point, don't stay here longer than you need to._ 'I wanted to make sure you were okay with my trip to Cressat?'

'Do you have a need to go to Cressat?' Wren asked.

'Yes. I need to meet some of my old contacts, and hopefully-'

'Then I don't care about you going,' Wren interrupted. 'Do you really think I want to keep tabs on every coming and going of my officers? That would be a nightmare! As long as your intelligence department continues to work you could take a holiday in Monturas for all I care.'

June paused, taken somewhat aback. 'Are you suggesting... that I take a holiday?' she asked, a little confused.

'No! Good grief, are you all incompetent?' Wren shouted. 'That would be a waste of clan time and resources.' She closed her eyes and her breathing became a little more controlled. 'I was just trying to illustrate a point, June.'

Okay, so she's very tightly sprung. 'My apologies,' June replied. 'I didn't quite understand your meaning.' June backed away to the door, but Wren continued speaking.

'You're all useless,' she said. 'You too, though you're less useless than most, hence why you're an officer.' Wren opened her eyes again and picked up a photograph from her desk. Her expression hardened as she looked at it. 'You know why Samael's dead? It was that traitor Giorgio. A Northerner, like you, and from the same clan no less.'

'I did not know,' June replied carefully. 'I never really met Giorgio-'

'I'm not trying to paint you with anything,' Wren cut in, once again calm. 'I'm sorry for snapping at you. Things have been... hard.'

'I understand that,' June said. 'If you need any help, anytime...'

'Yeah, whatever.' Wren opened up her computer again, waving for June to leave. 'Have a nice stay in Cressat. Say hello to Andreus for me if you see him.'

June left the office, grateful to be back into a lit area. She took a deep breath.

Wren was obviously in a bad way. Samael's death had hit her hard- no surprise there, since they'd been lovers for a long time- but she seemed to be blaming the northerners for it, which could be dangerous for June. _It's a good thing I'm getting away from here. A week or two in Cressat and this should all have blown over._ June set off for the airpads, feeling better about the situation.

The day was darkening into night as June arrived in Cressat, and dark storm clouds were building over both horizons. Those to the south

were the usual rains driven in of the southern seat, but from the north came clouds laden with dust and the foul black rain that had been falling over the north since the battle the previous day.

The air traffic over the great city hadn't been reduced any by the disaster, and there were more military patrols than June remembered. She set a course for the centre of the city, and contacted the Builder air traffic wardens. A bored sounding official asked her a few questions before granting her permission to land at the Fortress. They should have already received notice of her visit; after all, it was diplomatic in nature.

The Fortress stood tall above the city as it always had; a monolithic structure several kilometres along each side and over a kilometre tall at it's highest point, guarded by walls five hundred meters tall themselves. It was a city in it's own right, and housed tens- if not hundreds- of thousands of Spartans. June flew her pelican low over the walls and made for a side hangar space, realizing as she landed that it was the same one she'd landed at decades prior when she had first come to Cressat.

Nobody awaited her at the hangar. The small space was empty bar a pair of engineers performing maintenance on a falcon, and after a few minutes more of waiting June was still alone.

This is strange. The last time I was here, there were at least a dozen people here to receive us... Did nobody care? Surely such a large clan as the Builders wasn't just going to let her wander around their fortress as she pleased.

Oh well. This lets me do a few side things while I'm here. She made a beeline for the one person she wanted to meet most.

Much to June's concern, when she arrived at Alcor's room it had been turned into a crime scene. Another bored looking warden stood guard over the apartment, which had been ransacked. June stood shocked for a moment before hurrying to the guard.

'What happened here?' she demanded.

The warden shrugged. 'Someone broke in yesterday, we think.' He eyed June up. 'What, can't you tell that?'

'What about the man who lives here? Alcor?'

The warden looked surprised for a moment. 'You know him? He's been missing since yesterday as well. There's a reward for information on his whereabouts.'

June caught the undertone in the warden's voice. 'I've only just arrived from the North, I'm afraid.' She looked past the warden, into the remains of Alcor's apartment. 'May I go in?'

The warden looked startled for a moment. 'It's a crime scene, miss. Of course you can't!'

'But I knew him personally. I might be able to find something that your investigators missed.'

'That's a stupid excuse,' the warden replied.

'What if I don't touch anything? You'll be there to make sure I don't do anything wrong, of course.' June put on her most persuasive tone, and tried to look seductive in her power armour.

The warden thought for a moment. 'I guess there's nothing wrong with it...' he shot June a sharp look. 'If you see anything that might be evidence, tell me immediately.'

'Of course,' June said breezily, and walked past him.

Alcor's room hadn't changed much since she'd last been to see him several years past. That wasn't surprising- after all, he'd spent much of that time in Nasces- but it did help her identify what was missing. Careful not to disturb anything June gave the room a thorough look over, making a mental note of things that seemed out of place. A few things seemed to stand out- the documents that must have been stored in Alcor's desk had been thrown about the place even though the drawer wasn't big enough for anything else, and the desktop computer's hard disk had been removed.

This wasn't a burglary, and I doubt it was an abduction or murder attempt. Alcor knew something.

'See anything that strikes you?'

June bit her lip. Every instinct was screaming at her not to let on that she was suspicious. 'Do you often get burglaries like this?'

'I can't think of any since I've had this job,' the Warden said. 'Our security is very good.'

'So how come you couldn't prevent this?'

'Must have been a very good thief,' the Warden replied.

And something very much worth stealing, June added silently. 'Thanks for letting me have a look around, officer. If I think of something that could help, I'll make sure to let you know.'

'No problem,' the Warden said with a smile. 'Stay safe.'

By the time June had found her way out of the Builder Fortress and into Cressat the storm clouds had burst and the same vile black rain was falling from the sky as had at Solidade. The deluge had driven most of the aircraft from the sky and dimmed the light from the city, bringing as close to night as had ever existed in Cressat.

June left the Fortress on foot and made her way to the nearest Subway station, taking a train out into the suburbs. She exercised suitable caution, changing trains frequently and keeping an eye out that she wasn't being followed. As far as June could tell, she was okay to visit Alcor's safe house.

The Subway ended at the last base before the edge of the city, so she got out and walked alone through the rain to the derelict block that Alcor had used. It looked the same as it always had- a nondescript apartment building, falling slowly into ruin.

June pushed the door open and made her way down the corridor to

Alcor's safe room, keeping a careful eye on her surroundings. There were footprints in the dust, too many to be explained by Alcor alone. June drew her pistol and switched on the camouflage module on her armour. Silent and invisible, she slipped up to Alcor's door and pushed it open.

Moments passed and nobody came, so June entered the apartment, careful not to disturb anything. It was just like Alcor's apartment back at the fortress had been; the place was ransacked, with furniture and fixtures destroyed and papers thrown about the place. Bullet holes studded the walls around the door, and there were other obvious signs of a struggle.

Breathing out, June deactivated her camouflage. _Alcor's in big trouble, assuming he's still free._ Someone had definitely wanted Alcor gone, and whatever he had known... _He must have stumbled onto something big. A conspiracy?_

June spent a few minutes carefully checking around the apartment. The two things she was looking for had both been taken- Alcor's laptop, and the backup drive she knew he always hid in every place he stayed. The papers seemed to be mostly news related, and again it appeared as if the more important files they had no doubt obscured had been taken.

The last place June checked was the kitchen area. A quick inspection showed that a grille set into the wall was loose, and June carefully removed it. Inside was a tunnel far too large to be a simple airway- it looked to be almost large enough for a Spartan in armour, although June didn't fancy trying it. After shining her flashlight up and down a few times, June also noticed some scratches that had been left in the metal. _Somebody escaped through here. Alcor?_

June switched her camouflage back on and left the way she had entered. Once outside, she walked the perimeter of the building, looking for the exit to that escape shaft she'd seen inside. A similar grille to the one in Alcor's kitchen turned out to hide the other end of the shaft; it too was loose and a faint trail led away into the suburbs.

'Now here is where I should stop,' June whispered to herself. 'Whatever Alcor was dabbling in turned around and bit him back. Why should I get involved?'

'Because I owe it to him,' she replied quietly. 'And because I never could resist getting involved in something.' _None of us could, eh Alcor? You, me, Zero, and the rest... That's what got us into this mess._ June shook herself. _No time for reminiscing. _

She followed the trail for a few hundred meters until it reached an abandoned road that led towards a small copse. With no other ideas, June walked into the woods. Sure enough, a few meters in the trail resumed, leading towards a shack. June walked to the door and after a moments hesitation knocked.

The reply came in the form of a distinctive sound; that of a gun being cocked. June turned slowly to see a female Spartan pointing a rifle at her face.

'Don't move,' the Spartan spoke with a tremble. 'How did you find

me?'

'I followed the trail you left,' June replied. _That accent_... 'Are you from the North? I am too.'

The Spartan nodded slowly. 'Take off your helmet.' June complied, and the Spartan took a step back involuntarily. 'June?'

'You know me?' June asked.

The Spartan lowered her gun and took off her own helmet. 'I was from Aspertias too. I think we might have met, briefly. I'm, uh, Midori.'

An Aspertian? Is she related to Zero, then? 'Your face is familiar. Were you with Zero at the Black Runners?'

Midori grimaced. 'Yeah. He's gone now, though.' _Gone?_ 'What are you doing here?'

'I'm looking for Alcor,' June replied cautiously. 'Would you happen to know what happened to him?'

Midori opened her mouth, then glanced around nervously. 'Is it safe here?'

'Probably not,' June replied. 'I don't think I'm being followed, but to be sure... come with me, I know a place we can talk in private.'

4

Mason found his customary position at the Architects-General's right hand already occupied when he entered the briefing room. Alessia was sat there, a content look on her sharp face. When she noticed Mason she waved, a predatory smile twisting her features.

'Don't let her get to you,' Shara murmured. She tugged Mason's arm, guiding him to a spot further down the table, and the pair sat down. The smile didn't leave Alessia's face.

The assembled commanders represented almost all of the highest level command in the Builders. Each of Andreus's Generals was assigned a geographical area to look after and make plans for, and should a large scale war come they would be responsible for command of any forces in that area. The position of Marshal was a special one, given to the general that the leader of the clan considered the most competent. They were able to give orders to the other Generals even when not in their area of expertise.

Andreus entered at exactly the start time of the meeting, and took his seat at the head of the table.

'We seem to all be present, except Devan?' He looked questioningly at Alessia, who shrugged.

'He was still dealing with a rebellious clan in the Westerlands, last I heard,' Mason said. 'I was told not to expect him for a few days.' Devan was the general in command of the Westerlands and Sulpora.

Andreas frowned. 'Fine, we'll just make do without him.' He placed a laptop on the table in front of him and opened it, typing rapidly. 'We'll go clockwise from me. Garen?'

The first general to Andreas's left was Garen, a thin, dark skinned man from a small clan on the edge of the central wastes. His gaunt face twisted as he gave his report on the situation in his area of operations, the Pinnacle lands.

'We've been successful in keeping unrest down in Johon,' he said. 'The most prominent separatists have been arrested and deported, and we've been breaking up meetings we suspect to be seditious.'

'I'm glad to hear that,' Alcor praised. 'If only Devan could be so successful in Sulpora.'

'However,' Garen continued, 'There have been issues in Melaska. The city was badly damaged by the tidal wave last night, and we've lost a lot of the peacekeeping force we had stationed there.'

'Will you be able to re-assume control?'

'I'm working on it,' Garen replied, his face sour. 'I was going to head out there as soon as this meeting finishes. If we're fast, there should be no long term problems. Shale have stepped in to help while we get reinforcements from Cressat.'

After Garen had finished his report it was Shara's turn. She gave a brief run-down of the situation in Cressat, apologising personally for the breach of security at Ash Mesa. To Mason's surprise Andreas was understanding and lenient with her. _A chauvinist, no doubt._

'However- there was one thing I wanted to ask about,' Shara said after her report was through. 'There was a disturbance last night in the Citadel. Someone's apartment was broken into, and the occupant has gone missing. Is it anything I should know about?'

Andreas frowned. 'I hadn't heard about this,' he said. 'Who was the victim?'

'A man named Alcor,' Shara replied. 'Supposedly a diplomat attached to a clan in Solidade.'

Andreas' frown deepened. 'Alcor, you say?' He began typing furiously on his laptop. 'Ah, I see. It is odd that I wasn't informed about this.' Andreas shared a look with Alessia. 'You see, we'd identified Alcor as a security leak, possibly related to the Ash Mesa breach. I had a warrant out for his arrest.'

'So this wasn't caused by security?' Shara asked.

'If it was, I didn't order it,' Andreas replied. 'If you hear anything related to the break in or this Alcor, please let me know.' Shara nodded. Andreas turned to Mason, and his face soured.

'Mason, I don't expect a report from you. Alessia has taken over your role as Marshal, and I'm giving you her area to look after.' He took on a more conciliatory tone. 'Thompson was not forgiving of mistakes,

and I intend to follow his lead. If you fail again, the consequences will be severe.' Andreus looked expectantly at him.

'Don't expect my gratitude,' Mason said. 'And don't lecture me on Thompson's ways. I knew him far longer than you did.'

Andreus shrugged. 'As long as we understand each other.'

The last person to give a report was Ulara, the general in charge of the Irdnot Hills and the regions surrounding the city of Alethkar. Predictably she had little to report; the clans of that area were generally loyal to the Builders.

When Ulara had finished speaking, Andreus stood up to make his own announcements. 'All of you were made aware of our ultimate goal, correct? The unification of all Spartans, as it was under the First Order.'

'Thompson's goal,' Shara said. 'I thought he'd abandoned it after the second coalition war.'

'Thompson never abandoned his ambitions to unite our species,' Andreus replied. 'It would have been foolish to continue after the disasters of that war. Rather, he chose to wait for the right moment to strike.'

'The Outside Context Problem,' Garen said. 'That's our opportunity.'

'Exactly!' Andreus smiled. 'It's already removed one thorn from our side. With Nasces gone, the rest of the North will be easy to take over. The Citadel cannot stand alone; I expect to have them at their knees before the year is done.'

Wait- he abandoned Nasces. Did he even...? Mason spoke up. 'You sound glad that Nasces has been destroyed, it's population slaughtered. Did you ever intend to save the city?'

'They refused our assistance,' Andreus replied dismissively.

'And in return you ordered me to blockade the only route out of the city,' Mason said. 'We are responsible for their deaths.'

That broke Andreus' cool. He shot Mason an angry look. 'Had you succeeded at your task, none of that would have happened!' he shouted. 'You have no right to chastise me!'

Thompson would never have lost his cool like this. 'I suppose one way of looking at it is that if we simply kill everyone who isn't a part of our empire, we'll have unified everyone alive, right?'

If the previous statement had angered Andreus, that one seemed to calm him again, if only for a moment. For just a second he gazed calmly at Mason, a calculating look in his eyes. The intensity in his eyes scared Mason more than his previous anger.

'That was never Thompson's plan, and it's certainly not mine,' Andreus replied, and suddenly his anger returned, obviously held just in check. 'We have to conquer the other clans to save them. If they resist, we can hardly be held responsible for the misfortune they

experience as a result.'

Alessia stretched, smiling. 'I'm horrified you could even suggest such a thing, Mason.'

Mason frowned. 'I only-' he stopped as Shara nudged him hard in the ribs.

'Drop it,' she muttered, then turned to Andreus. 'What is our next course of action?'

Andreus sat back down and put his legs up on the table. 'I'll let our new Marshal explain.'

Alessia stood up, nodding to Andreus. 'With the annexation of Solidade recently there is now only one free city remaining on the central continent- Oaktier. Our historical attempts to attack the city have ended in failure for two reasons. Firstly, the cities ruling council has a close relationship with the Citadel clan, who have opposed our efforts. Secondly, the city is in a very defensible position, on an island that is only accessible by a causeway that is above the waters for only two hours every day.' The Spartan pulled out a map of the local area and spread it on the table. 'The latter problem is easier to solve. Since the last time we attacked Oaktier, we've acquired several coastal cities with the capability of fielding a large navy. We'll blockade the causeway and allow our troops to safely cross.'

'The Citadel has a sizeable navy as well,' Garen put in. 'As does Oaktier itself.'

'Hopefully the Citadel won't be a problem,' Alessia said. She paused to share another look with Andreus, then continued. 'We'll isolate Oaktier diplomatically and try to make the Citadel hostile towards them. Since Solidade is ours and Nasces no longer exists, they should have nobody to defend them.'

'And how exactly do you intend to do this?' Ulara put in. 'If you have a plan to defeat the Citadel, I'd like to hear it.'

'That will have to wait, I'm afraid,' Andreus replied. 'The fewer people know the details, the better.' His eyes rested on Mason as he spoke, and Mason found his temper rising again. He squashed the anger. _Your time will come, Andreus. If there's any justice, it will come._

3. Prelude to War (2)

****Outside Context Problem 2: Prelude to War (2)****

5

The Citadel elite loved ceremonies. From dusk till dawn the spiritual leaders of the eastern Spartans performed rituals, from chanting and praising to fighting and the occasional ritual decapitation. All in the name of appeasing... something. Citadel scripture was surprisingly tight lipped on the end goal of all of their actions, though that didn't stop countless millions from following blindly.

Hess had never liked the ceremonies that the Heresiarchs were compelled to perform. They were perfect opportunities for a rouge Spartan to draw a gun and murder her charges before anyone could react. As a bodyguard it was a challenge not to stop and search everyone who approached the man she was charged with protecting, but she knew he wouldn't approve. So she simply kept quiet and did her best to stay aware.

The morning prayers went smoothly, as it always did, and Heresiarch Grendel retired after a few well chosen words on the nature of war and it's calming effect on the soul. Hess followed at a discrete distance, eyes constantly scanning for threats. She only relaxed slightly when Grendel entered his private study. He walked over to his wardrobe and began to change from the ceremonial robes into his armour.

'Is it not a paradox that to teach about war, one must first retire from it?' Grendel asked without looking at Hess. He was referring to the policy that in order to enter the church structure and become a priest a Spartan had to renounce his clan and forgo the constant fighting that was the life of most.

'Distance from the subject is important for a teacher,' Hess replied, without putting too much thought into her reply.

'Indeed, if one is too closely involved with something it becomes hard to see the whole picture.' Grendel nodded. 'Yet perhaps we step too far away, and lose sight entirely? A puzzle for sure.'

I think it would be better if you ruminated on it in silence, Heresiarch. Hess held her tongue, as she always did.

A knock came at the door and Grendel gestured for Hess to answer it. It turned out to be a young messenger, looking nervous. 'I have a message for Heresiarch Grendel?' she spoke timidly.

'Give it,' Hess replied.

The messenger swallowed. 'Is the Heresiarch present?' she asked.

'Assume so,' Hess said. 'Speak.' _Why can't they just use a computer system, like all the other clans?_

The messenger swallowed again. 'Heresiarch Weynard bids that Heresiarch Grendel attend an emergency meeting on the Nasces diplomatic crisis. The meeting will be held in the Red Room in fifteen minutes.' The messenger bit her tongue.

Hess nodded sharply, then shut the door in the messengers face.

'A meeting?' Grendel asked as she turned back into the room. He had donned his armour and was now struggling to fit a cloak around his shoulders.

'In the Red Room, in fifteen minutes.'

'How exciting,' Grendel said, thick sarcasm evident in his voice. 'I can't turn Weynard down now, can I? Wait till I've had a glass of the

holy drink, and then we'll be on our way.'

After the holy drink- a bottle of wine imported at great expense from Oshanko- Grendel and Hess walked the short distance from his quarters to the Red Room. Though it was only a few corridors away, Grendel's insistence on speaking to everyone they passed meant that he arrived a couple of minutes late. The other four Heresiarchs were all inside already, talking animatedly.

'Did the messenger not pass on our summons?' Weynard asked sarcastically as Grendel entered. 'Or did you simply forget?'

'My sincerest apologies,' Grendel replied, for once sounding wholly sincere. 'I came as fast as I deemed necessary for such esteemed people as yourselves.' He nodded amicably to the others. Weynard's eyes narrowed.

'We may as well go from the start,' Heresiarch Drasna said. 'Weynard?' As the red faced Spartan puffed himself up, Hess took her accustomed place at the edge of the room directly behind Grendel. The other four bodyguards were stood similarly, all rigidly at attention. _And not looking around, keeping an eye on things._ Hess made a point of ignoring formalities where they conflicted with her job, something the bodyguards from Daath never seemed to understand. _And that's why Grendel hired me._

'I will be blunt,' Weynard said. 'Nasces is gone.'

'How so?' Grendel asked. 'Taken by the OCP?'

'Obliterated, and the Solnas bridge with it,' Weynard said. 'It looked as though the Northerners would lose the city, but at the last minute some enterprising fools managed to hijack the Builder space station and crashed it right on top of Nasces.'

'This may be the most desirable outcome,' Heresiarch Faile put in. 'Whether Nasces had fallen to the OCP or the Builders, we would have been worse off.'

'The Solnas bridge being destroyed is a weight off all of our shoulders,' Weynard agreed. 'A shame for those who perished, but this way we are safe.'

'For now,' Grendel said. 'Who is to say that the OCP won't rear its ugly head once again? We don't know what caused it to break out in the North- and had it happened almost anywhere else we would have been unable to contain it so easily- but it could happen again.'

'It is pointless to consider what could have been,' Drasna said with a sniff. 'We should be more concerned with the growing threat on our borders.'

'Indeed, the Builders are a problem,' Weynard agreed. 'With the Northern clans all but out of the picture the traditional balance of power has been destroyed.'

'They will attack Oaktier next,' Grendel predicted. 'It is the last free city on the continent, and I'm sure Andreus desires it greatly.'

'For once I agree with you,' Weynard nodded. 'We are bound by treaty to defend Oaktier.'

'And we should uphold that treaty.'

'Can we afford a war with the Builders?' Heresiarch Markus spoke. 'Our forces may be better trained, but they are significantly smaller than theirs.'

'Hmmm. Are there others who might also be persuaded to get involved?' Weynard asked.

'Oshanko perhaps,' Grendel mused. 'Or the Tu'Ce would make useful allies given their position.'

'Are any of the Northern clans in a position to help?' Markus asked.

Weynard shrugged. 'The Panthers have always been willing to fight the Builders in the past. And the Ghost Alliance were supposedly able to launch their own rescue mission to Nasces, so I'm sure they could be persuaded to assist us.'

Grendel nodded. 'Then we are all agreed that we should begin preparations for war?'

'I see no other choice,' Weynard said. 'I will ready the fleets and have them prepared to blockade the Azure Gulf and the Solar Straits.'

'Then I shall make contact with our prospective allies,' Grendel said. 'Perhaps it would be sensible to send envoys to the far eastern clans as well. Goodness knows we're going to need all the help we can get.'

6

The flames of the bonfire cast a warm glow over the central courtyard at the Steel Templars base. The heat made getting close impossible, but also meant that the assembled Spartans could stand comfortably in the cold evening air. Tomalon looked into the fire, and sighed.

Vivian stood beside him, cloak pulled tightly around her shoulders. The flickering light played across her raven coloured hair and danced in her eyes. Since the fire had been lit a few minutes earlier, she had done nothing but stare at the pyre providing it's fuel. Zero's helmet was in there, Tomalon knew. He didn't pretend to understand the feelings Vivian had for her dead lover. _In fact, I'm probably happier not knowing._

A small tower stood off to the side, and against the crackling of the flames a voice called out from it. Vernon stood at the top speaking into a microphone; beside him stood the head of Pastorias, as well as those of the other clans that made up the Ghost Alliance.

'Today we say goodbye to our friends and allies,' Vernon said. His voice was steady and firm; a reassurance. 'Those who fought to defend their own loved ones, their clans, and the world that provides for us. They made the ultimate sacrifice at Nasces to ensure that we

might survive to see another day, and for that we can never repay them. But we can go on.

'From death we find hope, and from disaster we must rebuild. Some wounds may never heal. The loss of a city and countless millions of lives will never be forgotten- it is a tragedy that cannot be undone. Yet if we allow ourselves to wallow in grief and sorrow we will find no future. We must go on, or else we soil the memories of those who allowed us to continue.'

Vernon was silent for a moment. Tomalon looked away from the flames to see tears on Vivian's face. _I should comfort her. But I can't._ He looked back to the fire, where it was comfortable.

'What happens next will not be easy,' Vernon continued. 'We struck a blow to the Outside Context Problem at Nasces, but it will come back, stronger than ever. We must find the will to keep on fighting, to persevere in the face of this unknowable enemy. It is not enough to simply defend our lands- we must strike again, and again, to make this continent safe for Spartans once more. It will not be easy. But we must do it.'

Vernon stepped back from the edge of the tower, back into shadow. A faint murmuring began amongst the assembled Spartans. _Strike back? Does he mean to take the fight to the OCP? That's suicide for sure._ Tomalon was inclined to agree, having been uncomfortably close to the black-clad Spartans that were the OCP's agents. They were fast, and more deadly than any real Spartan.

The leader of the Pastorias clan now spoke. 'Nasces has shaped us all, for better and worse,' she began. Tomalon hadn't had much to do with Navya since he'd arrived at the Ghost Alliance. She was a competent commander by all accounts; ruthless in battle and in diplomatic games, and a close friend of Vernon's. She commanded a great deal of respect from her clan. 'The events of that battle will echo around the world, and all shall know of our losses and the great victory we secured. All of us should feel proud. But remember this: The OCP is not the only enemy we face. The Builders, high and noble though they may have once seemed, caused the deaths of our friends as surely as the OCP did. They had the means to save a city of people, and instead they doomed them to die. Their actions are as good as a declaration of war upon the North and all it's clans.' Navya too stepped back, and after sharing a look with Vernon, disappeared.

'I guess that's it, then,' Tomalon said. The crowd seemed to share his opinion as they started to disperse. 'Shall we go?'

Vivian gave no signs of having heard him. She was stood still, gazing into the flames as though they contained the secret to life. Tomalon gently took her hand. 'Vivian?'

She gave a sudden start and looked at Tomalon with a blank expression. 'Uh. Sorry. I guess I zoned out there a little.' Her eyes flickered back to the fire, searching.

'Are you okay?' Tomalon asked.

'Not really,' Vivian said absently. She pulled her hand away from his and began to walk away. 'I need some time. Sorry.'

Tomalon watched her disappear into the crowds. _If I weren't a coward, I'd go after her._

After a moment's reflection, he shook his head. There were better things to worry about. Vivian was strong enough to handle her grief alone, he was sure. Better he didn't interfere and make it worse. With a sigh, Tomalon turned and walked away as well.

7

June still wasn't sure whether she was being watched, but it paid to take precautions. Midori swore she hadn't been seen so the two of them did what June had done earlier and took a circuitous route to where June wanted to go. After an hour on the Cressat subways, they ended up at one of the largest organizations in Cressat that wasn't a clan- the giant food mall. Despite the foul black rain now falling from the sky countless Spartans were walking about, buying food or eating in the restaurants and cafes. June chose a cafe at random and the two of them sat down with a drink each.

'You call this private?' Midori asked. Though she didn't have to shout, the background noise level was significant.

'Best place to get some privacy in Cressat,' June replied. Alcor had taught her that. In the year building up to the Striker Wars she had gotten very involved with the intelligence scene and it still surprised her how many vital conversations were had in cafes like this. 'Now, what exactly happened?'

'You know the space station that fell on Nasces? That was us.'

'What? Seriously?' June failed to keep her surprise from showing. 'You mean you and Alcor?'

'And a few others,' Midori said. 'Alcor helped the others from my squad hijack some spaceships and they took over the Anchor, then crashed it into Nasces. Alcor and I stayed here to co-ordinate the operation, but the Builders caught our signal or something and came to stop us.'

'And they took Alcor?' June sat back. _So he was_ _abducted_. Her fears were true, then. 'How did you escape, exactly?'

'Alcor held them off for a while, and I escaped through a vent. They didn't expect there to be anyone else with him so I was able to hide out until they left.'

June frowned. 'That's surprisingly incompetent, assuming they were Builder security.'

'Well that's what happened. I dunno if they were security or just some goons.'

'And what then?'

Midori shrugged. 'That's about it. I don't know much else about what's happening.'

'What you've told me is helpful. I had a feeling something was going

on beneath the surface here, and this just makes me more sure. Andreus is up to something, and Alcor was getting dangerously close to finding out.' _Which means..._ 'Actually, they may not have been Builder Security at all. If Alcor did have evidence against Andreus it would be disastrous if it fell into the hands of Security.' _Which explains why the warden knew nothing about it._

Midori was silent, and June looked back at her. She was chewing her lip nervously, and looked quite distressed now that she'd told June everything. 'Is there a problem?' June asked.

'Well, I kinda need to get out of Cressat,' Midori replied. 'I promised someone I'd meet him in Oaktier.'

'Can't you book a flight out?'

'Well, I'm not really supposed to be here.'

And if Andreus's goons picked up on that... 'I might be able to get you out of the city. I have my own Pelican...' Midori perked up at that. She looked hopefully at June. '...but I can't leave yet.'

'Oh...' Midori slumped a little at the table. 'Alright.'

June sighed. 'I'm sorry. Really, I am. But I have to find out what's going on here. I can't leave before I know.' _That's what I came for, after all._

'Right, yeah,' Midori nodded. 'Um. How are you going to do that?'

June tapped a small module attached to the waist of her armour. 'This is an active camo module. I can sneak into their archives.' She paused. 'Was Alcor's laptop with him when he was kidnapped?'

Midori thought for a moment. 'Actually, yeah. He used it to take over the Anchor's systems.'

'Then I need to find it. It will probably be in the restricted section, where they keep criminal evidence.' _That's going to be fun to break into._

Her mind made up, June drained the rest of her drink. 'I'm going to head off. I'll be gone for about a day, so you need to find somewhere to stay until I come back.' June thought for a moment. 'There was a hostel on the floor below us. Do you remember?' Midori nodded. 'You can stay there; it's probably safer than any clan's hotel.'

Midori sighed sadly. 'Okay. I'll wait there for you.'

'Are you okay with that?'

'It's just... I've been left behind quite a lot recently.'

'I'll come back for you,' June said. 'Just a day, okay?' She stood up and started to walk away. _Poor girl. Poor, poor girl._

Mason's quarters never felt much like home. He'd been away from them for the past half year, overseeing the Builder troop movements near Solidade, and even when he was in Cressat he didn't spend much time in them.

Barely know them really, Mason thought as he took a long look around. _Why do I have two bedrooms if I'm the only one who ever sleeps here?_ He took another look at the two bedrooms, then switched on his communications.

Half an hour later Shara knocked on the door, carrying a small backpack. 'I'd forgotten how nice it is to have you around!' she said, walking in. 'Ulara and Garen never invite me round.'

'It's nice to be back,' Mason agreed. 'I was just about to cook some, uh, brunch.' He'd heard the word being used in some of the trendy clans near Solidade, and had decided to see what all the fuss was about.

'You're treating me?' Shara smiled. 'At least let me help.' She put her backpack down on one of Mason's chairs, then started looking through it. 'Andreus gave me some written orders,' she said, producing a wad of paper. 'It's a fairly detailed plan for the attack on Oaktier.'

'Are we all going to be involved?' Mason asked, surprised.

'Alessia's in charge, naturally, but you and I have command of two of the three divisions,' Shara said. 'I guess it's an olive branch from Andreus?'

'Well, the north is my area.' Mason nodded. 'And you've got one of the least active areas, so he probably thought it was easiest to pull you away for a while. What are the plans?'

Shara spread the paper out on Mason's coffee table. 'Andreus is assembling a large force near Sun Faas. When that's done we'll make a quick, powerful thrust towards the causeway.'

'The timing's going to be pretty strict on this one,' Mason remarked. He walked to his bookshelf and pulled out an old map of the northern coast which he opened on the floor. 'Sun Faas is here,' he pointed to the Builder-aligned clan, 'and the causeway is here.'

Shara looked through the orders. 'Uh... oh, here it is. In a weeks time, the causeway is passable from ten till twelve in the morning. We're to leave before midnight, and hopefully be at the causeway before the Tairens realize we're attacking.'

Mason frowned. 'But there's another major clan marked on this map- The Velkans.' He pointed to the major clan marking, just below the causeway. 'We'll have to go through them first.'

'Andreus reckons it'll take two hours to beat them. Their base sits right above the only vehicle track through the Oaklands, so whatever happens we'll have to get through them.'

Mason nodded. 'That makes the schedule even tighter.'

'Yeah, but I think we can do it. We'll have the element of surprise, and in any case after the Anchor hit that whole area's in ruins. The coastal parts of Oaktier have been flooded or flattened.' Shara frowned. 'What I'm not sure about is whether starting another war now is a good idea.'

'Andreus seemed pretty sure the Citadel wouldn't get involved,' Mason replied.

'That's bullshit. I bet they're drawing up their own plans right now.' Shara shook her head. 'I mean, we could probably beat them provided they didn't call in another coalition, but is that really what we want to be doing right now?'

'What do you mean? Unifying Spartan kind is our mission.'

'I don't disagree, but-' Shara sighed. 'We came within a hairs breadth of losing everything. If the OCP had crossed the SolNas bridge we could not have stopped them. For all Thompson's claims there really was no plan in place to prevent that from happening. What's happening on the Northern continent would have happened here.' Shara looked at Mason, deadly serious. 'Do you know how many of the clans of the North have been destroyed?' Mason shook his head. 'Seventy percent. That's probably about seven million dead, not including Nasces. Of the major clans, all that remain are those that joined the Ghost Alliance, the Strikers, and the Panthers.'

The numbers didn't seem real to Mason. _Seven million? That can't be right._ 'So you're saying we should be fighting the OCP?'

'I'm saying maybe Andreus doesn't have his priorities straight,' Shara said.

'So... what? We can make suggestions at the next meeting, but at best- the very best- he'll ignore them.'

'Why do we follow Andreus?' Shara asked suddenly.

'Because he's the leader?' Mason replied. 'Thompson designated him as his successor.'

'So you trust him?' Shara pressed.

'Hell no,' Mason said. 'He's bungled everything he's done.'

'But you follow him because you trusted Thompson.'

'Well... yeah.' Thompson had been a leader you could trust. A visionary genius and a master of the battlefield, yet kind to his subordinates._ 'We all followed Thompson.'

'You know I'm from Ceren?' Shara asked. 'I can remember when it was independent. I fought against the Builders during the coalition wars.'

'And then Thompson saw your talent,' Mason continued. He'd heard this story before.

'I followed Thompson because he was the best damned leader on the planet. But Andreus is nothing compared to Thompson. He's going to

ruin everything we've worked for, if he doesn't destroy the world through his incompetence first.'

Mason's mind was racing ahead. _Can she be suggesting..._ 'You mean to overthrow Andreus.'

'We can do it. Alessia is fanatically loyal to him, but Ulara, Garen and Devan are reasonable people. Between the five of us we'd control well over half of the Builder's armies.'

'This is treason,' Mason said. He stepped away from the now forgotten orders and sat heavily in a chair. 'You're plotting open rebellion against the clan.' _Treason against your own clan... it's the ultimate betrayal._

'No! This is for the good of the clan, and the Builder Empire!' Shara said firmly. 'If we do nothing and simply allow Andreus to mess up things the way he's been doing so far, everything will be all for naught!'

Mason didn't reply. _I've spent my life working for this clan. I've fought and died to make it great. Can I turn my back on all of that?_ _'I can't betray the clan,' he said eventually. 'I just can't.'

Shara sat down next to him. 'You won't be betraying the clan,' she said softly. 'Who, or what, holds your loyalty?'

'Thompson,' Mason replied immediately.

'He's dead.'

'The Builders,' Mason continued. Shara nodded.

'And who, or what, would you be betraying?' She stressed the who.

'Andreus.'

'Is Andreus the Builders?' Shara asked.

I... guess not. Mason shook his head. 'I see what you mean. But this isn't something I can just rush into. I need to know that we're doing the right thing.'

'That's fair enough,' Shara replied. 'But we don't have a lot of time.'

'I won't take too long,' Mason said. 'After we've had our brunch I'll take a look through the archives. There's some records from Thompson's time I want to reread. I have a feeling they'll confirm that Andreus isn't continuing what Thompson began.'

Shara smiled. 'Sure thing. But as you said, brunch first!'

4. Prelude to War (3)

****Outside Context Problem 2: Prelude to War (3)****

June took a train straight to the Builder Fortress, having finally decided she wasn't being followed. Getting into the Fortress itself was easy enough, being a popular tourist destination, and finding the archives was similarly easy. The large archives filled up several huge vaults in the basement of the Fortress, and for the most part were open to the public, though some areas were restricted. June paid the small entrance fee and went in.

The Builder Archives were huge, with millions of records and books stretching back tens of thousands of years. Even in the entrance there were a few hundred people milling around, reading books and speaking in low voices. June wandered over to the nearest map and found the area marked as 'Restricted Section'. She wouldn't be able to get in directly, but thanks to the active camouflage module on her armour- itself cloaked, since such things were generally frowned upon- June was sure she could find a way.

June wandered to the section closest to the Restricted area and browsed through the books for a few minutes, keeping an eye out for anyone who looked like they might be going through the locked door. Eventually she spotted a Builder walking purposefully towards the door. Casually June wandered around the corner, where nobody could see her, and activated her Active Camouflage. As quickly and quietly as she could June went back around the corner and started walking close behind the Builder. The Builder produced a keycard from her overalls and swiped herself through; June nimbly stepped through the door as well.

The Builder walked quickly away from the entrance and June was able to slip into an aisle and deactivate her camouflage with a few seconds to spare on the power. It would be a few minutes before it was usable, but June wasn't too concerned- as long as she acted like she had the right to be in the restricted section of the Archives, she was pretty sure nobody would challenge her. The real problem became quickly obvious- there were no maps, as the designers had probably assumed that anyone with the clearance to enter would know where they were meant to be anyway.

As June walked down the main aisle, she began to realize just how large the restricted section was. Marked as just a small room on the map she'd seen previously, it was in fact as big if not bigger than the main area. Just as she was despairing of ever finding the criminal archives, June saw a man wearing the uniform of a captain in Builder security step out from a side aisle and began walking down the main aisle. Bingo. June continued walking the way she had been before, but made sure she kept an eye on the man. After a few minutes he turned off into another aisle, and June saw that the shelf signs read 'Ongoing Enquiry Evidence'. June kept walking until she was sure she was past that section, then turned into an empty aisle and began browsing the texts in the shelves.

She was pretty sure that though nobody had challenged her- a few had clearly made note of her clan emblem, but not seemed concerned- they would raise an eyebrow at a Black Runner entering the Builder's criminal archives. So June waited for a few more minutes, then activated her Camouflage again and walked quickly back to the Ongoing Enquiry Evidence section.

June slipped into the aisle and walked down it, glancing quickly along the shelves. They were sorted alphabetically, in reverse. _Probably for the best. _The aisle curved slightly so the second half wasn't visible from the main aisle. June's camouflage would only last for a minute and a half if she was stood still, so it was preferable to simply stand somewhere she couldn't be seen.

As June had hoped, the man who had turned into the section earlier was gone. She was able to walk safely along the shelves until she found the A section. Halfway up one of the shelves was a collection of files and a single evidence box marked 'Alcor'. June quickly rifled through the files, but could find nothing of interest. The evidence box, however, contained exactly what she'd been looking for- Alcor's Laptop.

June looked both ways along the aisle, then pulled out her toolkit and took the screwdriver. She unscrewed the covering for the hard drive and took it out. June then took her PDC out of the toolkit, connected it to the hard drive and began downloading everything off it. She glanced at the progress report on the PDC's small screen- five minutes. June put the hard drive on the floor and quickly returned everything else to the way it had been before.

An agonising three minutes then passed as June waited for the files to transfer before exactly what she'd been dreading happened- she heard footsteps echoing down the aisle. Heart suddenly hammering June ripped her PDC away from the hard drive and shoved it back into the Laptop, quickly replacing the covering. She grabbed the toolkit and activated her camouflage, breathing heavily. She was not expecting to see the two people who appeared from around the corner.

Andreas she recognized immediately. He was wearing simple overalls and looked tiny compared to his companion, a female Spartan in Builder armour. He was also lacking the trademark sneer he wore in all of the photos June had seen of him- without it, he looked fairly normal.

'Someone will know something,' his companion was saying in an Alethi accent. 'People don't just vanish.'

'I'm pretty sure if we actually had the camera footage for that minute, you would see just that,' Andreas replied calmly.

June slowed her breathing and moved quietly to the side of the aisle. Andreas walked up to where she had just been standing and removed Alcor's documents from the shelf. He handed the box to his companion and took the folders himself.

'Why do you say that?' the female Spartan asked.

'Because, dear Alessia, there was more to Alcor than met the eye,' Andreas said.

Alessia? Isn't she one of his generals?

'He was just an old fart who survived on Thompson's pity.'

'Thompson kept him around for a reason.' Andreas shook his head. 'I'll explain the details to you later, but suffice to say- of all the things that threaten our plan, that 'Old Fart' scares me the

most. Him or-' Andreus cut off. 'They weren't supposed to get involved,' he muttered. Alessia glanced at Andreus, but made no further comment.

The pair began to walk back down the aisle. 'But, Alcor's gone now,' Alessia said after a few steps.

'What makes you sure he's gone for good?' Andreus asked. 'He vanished into thin air inside his cell. Nobody left, there were no tunnels he could have escaped from, and the whole area was shielded from blink teleports. Someone who can simply cease to exist like that...' The pair disappeared and Andreus's voice tailed off.

The charge on June's camouflage ran out and she reappeared, still breathing heavily. Andreus had just given her a goldmine of information- yet she understood almost none of it. He had as good as confirmed that he'd abducted Alcor, yet now it seemed that Alcor had escaped. _But from the way he talked about Alcor... it was as if he was ascribing Alcor some supernatural power._

June waited in the aisle until her camouflage recharged fully, then slipped out and into another section where she deactivated it. Careful regulation of her breathing allowed June to calm her racing pulse, and she began the walk back out of the Archives.

10

Mason let himself into the restricted section of the archives and began walking down the main aisle. The closed records he wanted were almost a kilometre down the huge vault, giving him plenty of time to think. The thoughts that came were not ones he was used to.

Should I be doing this?

Am I betraying the Builders?

Who do I owe my loyalty to, anyway?

He passed a Black Runner walking the other way and turned, surprised to see anyone not from the Builders in the restricted archives. _Is that..._ He stopped, then hurried to catch up to the Black Runner. 'Excuse me,' he said, tapping her on the shoulder.

The Black Runner turned around quickly, seeming startled. 'Can I help you?' she asked.

Her voice was deeper than Wren's, and Mason realised his mistake. 'Oh- sorry, I mistook you for someone else.'

'Oh.' The Black Runner seemed nonplussed. 'Uh...'

_Well, I've interrupted her now. _'I'm Mason,' Mason said, holding his hand out. 'General in charge of the northern reaches- where the Black Runners are.' He turned off the reflection on his visor.

'My name's June,' the Black Runner replied. Her own visor became transparent, and Mason saw that she looked nothing like Wren. 'I'm in a bit of a hurry.'

'I just need a moment,' Mason said quickly. 'I assume you know Wren?'

Is she okay?'

'Yeah, I'm on her council,' June replied. 'She's coping okay, but Samael's death came as a blow.'

'I'd like to speak to her soon,' Mason said.

'I think perhaps the official channels would be more helpful.' June frowned.

'Ah, but could you let her know she had my condolences?'

'Of course,' June replied curtly. 'Now I'm afraid I really do have to be on my way. Good day, General Mason.' She made to turn, but then paused, looking at something behind Mason.

Mason blinked, then turned to see what she was staring at. His heart sank when he saw Andreus and Alessia walking past. Andreus was wearing his trademark sneer, and he shouted to Mason.

'Ah, General Mason. Did Shara give you the orders? I expect to see both of you tomorrow morning at nine, sharp. Don't go being the second person to pull a vanishing act on me!' He laughed and continued on his way. Alessia glanced back at Mason, then whispered something in Andreus's ear. Though her expression was serious, Andreus laughed again.

Mason realised his hands had curled into fists, and forced himself to relax. He looked back at June. 'He often comes across as-' Mason stopped as soon as he saw June's face. She had gone pale, and was breathing heavily. _She knows something._ Quickly Mason grabbed her by the hand and pulled her along the aisle, into a small side room meant for quiet reading. He locked the door shut and sat the Black Runner down, then crouched beside her.

'What do you know?' Mason asked.

June blinked, then shook her head. Her expression became neutral and when she spoke her voice was carefully controlled. 'He seems very difficult to get along with,' she said.

'That's not what I asked,' Mason replied. 'Don't lie to me; I'm on your side. Now what do you know?'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Andreus likes to drop hints while he's talking; he thinks it makes him look smarter,' Mason said. 'He's always done it. I see that you picked up on one of them- what was it?'

'I really have no idea-'

'TELL ME!' Mason shouted, slamming the table. June jumped, and inhaled sharply. 'Tell me,' Mason's voice was calm once more, 'or this goes poorly for you.'

Once again June brought her breathing under control, though now when she spoke she was clearly nervous. 'I thought he was referring to me,' she said. 'But now I think he was referring to Alcor.'

Alcor? The name is... familiar. 'Who is Alcor?' Mason asked.

'You worked with Thompson, right?' Mason nodded. 'Alcor worked with Thompson. I don't know what they did, but Thompson trusted him with various things.' _Ah, now I remember. That funny little man who never seemed to have a concrete job._

'Explain,' Mason ordered.

'I don't know what the things were. Alcor never told me.'

'Not that. What was Andreus referring to when he mentioned a vanishing act?'

'Alcor did some things that could be seen as betrayal,' June said. 'So Andreus had him imprisoned. Only now he's gone missing, and even Andreus doesn't know what happened to him.'

What the Black Runner was telling him made no sense. This was something which Mason had had no idea was going on. He'd been looking for evidence of Andreus not following Thompson's wishes, not some secret plot involving an old Spartan he barely knew. And it was clear that June wasn't supposed to be in the restricted section of the archives. 'How did you get in here?'

'I've got an active camouflage module, so I just snuck in behind someone.'

'What were you looking for? Information about Alcor?'

June nodded. 'I found his laptop, and managed to get some of the files off it. Andreus interrupted me.' _Hence the concern about 'vanishing act'. _

Mason frowned. 'You and I are going to have a little chat back at my apartment,' he said. June's face fell, and she swallowed nervously. 'I'm not going to turn you in. But I think there's some things I should know about.' Mason pulled the Black Runner to her feet. 'My word is good enough to get you out of here. Follow.'

11

The Ghost Wall had been built alongside the Pastorias clan base, at the point where the peninsular connected to the mainland. It ran for almost fifteen kilometres- the ends trailing out into the ocean- and stood two hundred meters high, matching the highest points of Pastorias. A system of walkways and elevators allowed access to the top, where gun emplacements and lookout towers had been positioned. On a clear day, sentries could see several kilometres from the top, across the marshy ground and rolling hills.

Vernon had wanted to inspect the wall personally before the OCP arrived in force, and had called a few of his generals and advisor's to accompany him. Tomalon had come along mostly out of a desire to see the great wall that was to protect them from the OCP; as it turned out he could see little in the pervasive grimy rain that still fell from the sky.

'We've seen them use all sorts of tactics to breach defences,' the chief engineer was saying. Freya was a slender woman who disdained

armour, preferring her well worn coveralls- a decision that left her wet and filthy from the muck that rained down. 'They can jump pretty high, and throw each other even further.'

'Presumably you built the wall high enough to avoid such things?' Vernon asked.

'Of course, of course,' Freya replied with a dismissive gesture. 'We've not seen them go above a hundred meters- actually quite a lot less- so we're safe here. I was more worried about those swords of theirs to be honest; a lot of folks got nightmare stories about them slicing through walls to get around a blockade.'

'How have you prevented that?'

'That's the trick that made it cost so much,' Freya said. 'Twenty-two copper wires a foot each in diameter, running a foot back from the outer layer of the wall at the base.' She mimed a sword swinging. 'Blackhead tries to cut through? They get fried.'

'How does that work?' Tomalon asked. 'Does it transmit through the energy swords?'

'Apparently so,' Freya replied. 'Heard it from some guys who came down from Gateway. Those clans up there been fighting the OCP long as anyone, developed some tools to keep their soldiers alive longer. One of them is a wrist-shield-thing that knocks out a sword soon as it gets hit.'

Tomalon nodded. _I haven't a clue what this woman is saying._ Freya was from Pramos originally, and though she spoke common like the rest of the Ghosts it wasn't her native language and she had a strong accent. She was also the first Pramosian Tomalon had met in a long time; the islanders tended not to leave their remote clans.

Vernon walked to the edge and slowly looked around. 'It's a good wall,' he said slowly. 'But we're not going to know how good until the OCP arrives tomorrow.' It sounded like praise to Tomalon, but Freya just shrugged. She walked away, shouting at some workmen.

Tomalon found himself gazing out into the haze, vainly trying to see signs of the approaching army. They were still a hundred or more kilometres off, moving faster than a Spartan could run. He'd heard that there was a small legion of vehicles just ahead of the leading edge, fleeing the tide of death.

An aide scurried up to Vernon and spoke quickly in his ear. He nodded, then turned to face his council. 'We're returning to Pastorias,' he said. 'The Ghosts have visitors.'

Tomalon heard the approaching armada before he saw it. It began as a low drone, steadily increasing in pitch and volume until the shapes of aircraft became visible in the haze. Hundreds upon hundreds of Pelicans, Falcons and 'Hawks, all flying in formation towards Pastorias base. _This is what's left?_ Tomalon sighed inside. _This is all that's left of the Dark Strikers._

One aircraft split off from the rest as the armada curved round to land in the fields to the east of Pastorias, alighting on the edge of

the landing pad Tomalon and Vernon were stood on. The ramp unfolded at the back and a Spartan walked out, flanked by two guards. He walked towards Vernon, eventually stopping and nodding respectfully. Tomalon watched him all the way up, frowning. _Something's not right..._

'Vernon, of the Steel Templars,' he said. 'I am Alsatoth of the Dark Strikers.' _Hmmm..._

'The Ghost Alliance welcomes you Alsatoth, as well as your clan,' Vernon replied. He held out a hand, and Alsatoth shook. 'It's been a while.'

'That it has,' the Striker acknowledged. He looked Tomalon up and down, then smiled. 'Tomalon, of Vermillion?'

'The same,' Tomalon said. He shook Alsatoth's hand. 'Why do you still wear your clan emblems?'

Alsatoth smile grew wider. 'Ah, someone noticed. I had thought it might be you.' He turned back to Vernon. 'This is not all of us, just all we could fit into the aircraft we had. The rest are travelling by boat, and should be here in a few days time.'

So they escaped whole? Tomalon felt his spirits rise slightly. _The dark strikers escaped the OCP?_

'Are they bringing your core with them, by any chance?' Vernon asked.

'Not one, but three,' the Striker said. 'That of the Dark Striker clan as well as two others that were fleeing the Problem.'

Vernon nodded. 'Well, that solves the first problem. I had worried that we would not have space on our cores to fit three clans in, but you can just set yours up.'

'That was our plan, yes. But what of the other problems?'

'Of a less practical and more political nature. You are joining the Ghost Alliance,' Vernon said. If his voice had held humour before, it was deadly serious now. 'The Ghost Alliance is a dictatorship, led by me. Every clan leader has the right to petition me and give me advice, but in the end the decisions are made by me. This is not a democracy; my place is not up for grabs.'

'We're not here to start a revolution,' Alsatoth said carefully.

'No. I am simply making sure you understand the terms by which you are allowed to live on this peninsular. I will get a full copy of the union agreement to you and the other clan leaders by the end of today, for you to sign.'

Alsatoth sighed. 'I had hoped not to encounter prejudice against our kind here.'

'Believe me, I am the least prejudiced of the clan leaders out here,' Vernon said flatly.

'Do you impose a political structure upon the clans themselves?'

'No. You may maintain whatever political structure you find works for you. Several clans in the Alliance have democratic elections for certain positions.' _Not the Steel Templars, though._ Vernon was notorious for being hugely anti-democratic, and had committed his clan fully against the Strikers during the war thirty years before.

'Then I see no real problem.' _You will soon, believe me._

Tomalon spoke up. 'What about the rest of the Striker clans?' he asked. 'Are they coming as well?' The unspoken comment hung in the air; that many clans would tip the balance of power wholly away from Vernon.

'They have made alternate arrangements,' Alsatoth replied. Vernon visibly relaxed.

'Which are?' He asked.

'They're evacuating to the Gateway safe area.'

'And why didn't your clan go as well?'

Alsatoth shrugged. 'It was decided to temporarily suspend the federation rather than risk falling to the OCP. The places we evacuated to didn't matter a huge amount. But, the actual reasoning was simple expedience- the voyage around the isle of Socotra would have taken twice the length of time as coming here.'

Vernon nodded. 'Well, we can discuss the details when your clans have arrived,' he said. 'Now, you'll probably be wanting to rejoin your clansmen.'

Alsatoth nodded, and with a slight bow to Vernon, returned to his Pelican.

'He's going to be trouble,' Tomalon murmured as the Striker flew away.

'I wasn't aware the two of you were acquainted,' Vernon said. _Oh, he picked up on that?_

Tomalon laughed. 'I replaced him,' he said. _And that's one thing he will never forget._

'Ah.' Vernon sounded oddly pleased. 'Trouble, then.'

12

Nobody questioned June or Mason as they left the archives and walked the kilometre or so to Mason's apartment. Quite a few of the Spartans they passed nodded respectfully to Mason, but otherwise nobody seemed the slightest bit concerned that a Black Runner was walking through a part of the Builder Fortress normally off limits to other clans.

Mason let them into his room, then hesitated. 'Sorry for shouting at

you,' he said. 'Would you like something to drink?'

June blinked, a little taken aback. 'Uh. Coffee please. Black.'

'Sure, just take a seat. I'll give Shara a call.' Mason disappeared into his kitchen, and June took a seat on the sofa that had clearly been reinforced to take the weight of a Spartan in armour.

_He's... not what I expected. _June looked around; the room was nondescript, and looked like it hadn't been much lived in. _Nothing to suggest what he's really like._ She shifted uncomfortably, unsure quite what to do. Could she trust Mason? Did she have a choice? _Dammit June, you've become too accustomed to playing it safe. What happened to the June who used to break into clan bases for fun?_ She grimaced. _That June died with the uprising 20 years ago._

After a while a knock came at the door, and Mason hurried out of the kitchen to answer it. A short, blonde Spartan appeared, giving Mason a hug. She turned to June and smiled.

'This is the one you found sneaking around the archives?' she asked Mason.

'This is June. If she's telling the truth, she knows some interesting things about Andreus.' Mason walked back into his kitchen.

June stood up. _Is this... General Shara? _'I'm June, of the Black Runners.'

'I'm Shara,' the Spartan said. 'It's my pleasure to meet anyone who can make Andreus' day a little worse.'

Mason returned carrying drinks and set them down on his table. 'We don't have forever, so explain again- from the start- what's going on.' Shara and Mason both sat down, looking intently at June.

June took a moment to organize her thoughts, then began speaking. 'I'm not sure exactly what the two of you are looking for, but it doesn't seem to be the same as what I've found. I was looking into the disappearance of a man named Alcor, a Builder. He was involved in the hijacking of the Anchor and abducted, I assume by Andreus's personal guard. In the archives I found Alcor's laptop, and downloaded some files off it, but before I could finish the download Andreus turned up and took all the case files away.'

'How is this relevant?' Shara asked Mason.

'Just let her finish,' Mason replied. He gestured for June to continue.

'Alcor wasn't arrested legally, that's for sure. Security were treating his disappearance as a possible crime, and didn't seem to know anything. And Andreus took the evidence, so he must have wanted it disposed of.' Shara looked impatient, so June hurried to get to the bit that had surprised her. 'I was cloaked when Andreus was there, and I overheard some of his conversation. He said that Alcor was the biggest threat to his plan, whatever that is. Only Alcor had vanished from the holding cells they were keeping him in, which seemed to have Andreus spooked. And he made some reference to some...

organization, I guess, who weren't supposed to get involved.' June stopped talking and took a deep breath.

Shara and Mason shared a look. 'So you didn't hear anything solid from Andreus?' Shara asked. 'Any names, or explicit details?' June shook her head.

'Alcor... I remember now,' Mason said thoughtfully. 'He was with Thompson from time to time. I think Thompson called him a special advisor. Did you know him personally?'

June nodded. 'He was assigned to be an ambassador to the North almost fifty years ago. I first met him during the Northern League Wars, and he fought with us in the Striker Wars ten years later.'

'I still don't see how this relates to what we want,' Shara put in. 'So Andreus locked this Alcor up. Thompson occasionally saw fit to have people removed as well. If he was involved with the Anchor incident, it seems reasonable that Andreus would want to get rid of him.'

'If he was helping the hijackers he must have not liked Andreus much,' Mason mused. 'And Andreus was very keen to get rid of his laptop?'

'You think there might have been something useful on it?' Shara asked.

'It's worth looking.' Mason stood up and walked to a cupboard, from where he withdrew his own laptop. 'Connect your PDC to this and we'll have a look.'

Mason set the laptop down on the table and June plugged the PDC in. Mason opened a file browser, and began looking through the files stored on the PDC.

'There's quite a lot of stuff on here,' Shara said. 'How are we going to know what's important?'

'I guess we just have to look through everything,' Mason replied, clicking through various documents. 'Most of these are mundane reports.'

'Look for something that's password protected,' June suggested.

'Good idea,' Mason agreed. He scrolled through the list of items until he reached a single folder that was protected by a password, which he opened.

'Then how are we going to get into the file?' Shara asked.

'It's giving a hint.' Mason squinted at the small text on the screen. 'It says 'Who makes the best cakes?'' He looked to June.

June suddenly felt faint. _He... did Alcor know I would find this?_ June replied in an unsteady voice, 'Zero and Vivian.'

Mason frowned, but typed the names in. There was a quiet beep, and the folder opened.

'Well these are no better,' Shara said. 'These are all just delivery reports.'

'Strange ones, though,' Mason added. 'Look at these details- delivery of four packages from Nasces to the Torchbearers. No description, just a serial code: BEA-COM.'

Shara shrugged. 'That means nothing to me.'

'They go on,' Mason said as he scrolled through more of the reports. 'And these ones are marked top secret. Why? They're just delivery reports to... The Citadel?' Mason looked surprised. 'Why were we making top secret deliveries to The Citadel? They're our enemies!'

'These aren't even from Cressat,' Shara pointed out. 'Look, it says their origin is Oaktier.' Mason reached the bottom. 'These are dated fairly recently; the last was just a few days ago.'

'Managed to find two Black Runners to give the final package to,' Mason read. 'Will stay in Oaktier for a few more weeks, just to make sure. Marielle.' He frowned. 'Who's Marielle?'

Shara sat back. 'I'm sure this is all very important,' she said, 'But without context I have absolutely no idea what this is referring to.'

June tried to think back a month or so, back to before everything had changed. _Torchbearers... the name's familiar._ 'The Torchbearers were a northern clan,' June said. 'They were one of the first to succumb to the Outside Context Problem.'

'When, exactly?' Mason asked.

'I'm not sure. It would have been about the time this whole issue kicked off... four weeks ago, maybe.'

'The last recorded delivery to them was four weeks ago,' Mason noted. 'After that all of them go to The Citadel.'

'So they stopped delivering to the Torchbearers when their clan was destroyed,' Shara suggested.

'Actually, slightly before,' June corrected. 'I remember now- the first major clan to fall was Benzene, but the Torchbearers may actually have been the first. In any case, this delivery was made a day before we found their base had been taken over.'

The Builders were making secret deliveries to the first clan to be taken over by the OCP... could there be a causal relationship?

Mason's sour expressions indicated he'd been struck by the same thought. 'That's some coincidence,' he muttered. 'But there's not enough here to know anything for sure.'

'Perhaps if I'd been able to get all of Alcor's files we'd know more.' _Damn Andreus and his uncanny timing. And damn him for taking Alcor away from me!_

'This isn't enough,' Shara said with a tone of finality. 'It's suggestive, but without a smoking gun near useless. We should be looking elsewhere.'

Mason nodded. 'I'm sorry June, but we simply can't act on this.' He looked her in the eye. 'That said, I'm going to do what I can to find this man Alcor.'

June sighed. 'Fine. Sorry I couldn't be of more help.' All of a sudden she felt really tired. 'I have someone I need to get out of the city, quietly. Would you be able to help?'

'Of course. Do you want a while to rest?'

'Yeah, that actually sounds like a great idea.' _Just hold on a little longer, Midori._

End
file.